



Plant Tour of Duty

by Sean D. Shields

Plant tours are an effective way to educate our lawmakers about the industry.

Eighteen thousand square feet. A modest size for a house, if you're a successful Chicago area developer. Not exactly the type of house Mike Karceski, owner of Atlas Components in Rockford, IL would want to own, but certainly the type he doesn't mind providing components for. Yet, as Mike showed the blueprints to Congressman Donald Manzullo, you could tell the lawmaker appreciated his constituent's taste in architecture and home living style.

"I would like nothing more than to sit in the library here and smoke a cigar with you, maybe even have a beer," Manzullo joked with Karceski as he pointed to the 1,200 sq. ft. library and reading room. "Well," one of the technicians replied, "maybe it would be better to do that in the pub right down the hall."



Mike Karceski, owner of Atlas Components, welcomes Illinois Congressman Manzullo to his Rockford plant for a tour.



Showing your lawmaker the design process—from plan drawings to truss design software—is a great place to begin the "meat" of your tour. Here Atlas designer Karl Ropp shows Congressman Manzullo plans for one of the large estates Atlas is working on.

Building Relationships

While sitting down with your lawmaker and having a beer or coffee is certainly a good long-term aspiration, it's probably a more realistic goal to have a few face-to-face conversations with him or her first. In an effort to begin developing strong relationships with members of Congress, component manufacturers across the country are making a point to host plant tours with their lawmakers.

- at a glance**
- ❑ Atlas Components invited Congressman Manzullo to its plant for a tour.
 - ❑ A new WTCA Board resolution recommends that each chapter designate a Local Relationship-Building Chair and host two plant tours each year.
 - ❑ WTCA staff is developing a detailed database of the professional organizations in their chapter marketplace.

South Carolina

David Horne at Universal Forest Products hosted a tour with his Congressman Howard Coble. "I've met Representative Coble in Washington, DC before, and he is a really approachable guy. When he came into our plant, our employees enjoyed interacting with him, and it gave us a great opportunity to discuss our concerns concerning pending legislative issues that directly affect the component industry," said Horne.

At its October 2006 meeting, the WTCA Board passed a resolution focused on utilizing plant tours to educate professionals in the marketplace on various aspects of the manufacturing and design process, as well as the performance of building components (see sidebar on page 30 for full text). Plant tours are relationship building opportunities you can offer to those outside the industry, from high school students to building industry groups to lawmakers.

In the case of lawmakers, plant tours give component manufacturers the opportunity to bring these individuals out from behind their desks and into a dynamic learning environment. You probably haven't thought of your production facility in those terms, but that is exactly what it is. Most members of Congress don't know a great deal about our industry. For those who are at least familiar with the industry through past legislative conferences, they likely have little to no understanding of what actually goes into designing and manufacturing these products. Plant tours are a chance to enlighten them.

In addition to providing a learning experience, plant tours also provide ample opportunity for manufacturers to talk face-to-face with their lawmakers and start building lasting relationships. It is also an effective way to discuss pressing

issues facing your business operations because it's possible to point to specific examples while walking through the plant.

It should also be said that lawmakers, in general, are outgoing, gregarious and verbose individuals. They aren't afraid to ask questions, broach any subject and interact with your employees. The component manufacturers who gave plant tours over the past few months learned quickly that they didn't have to worry about talking the entire time!

A Successful Plant Tour

If you read Congressman Manzullo's article in the November issue, you could tell he's supportive of our industry. A long-time lawmaker from Rockford and former Chairman of the U.S. House Small Business Committee, he knows the economy of his district and our nation is dependent on small busi-

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WTCA Board Resolution October 2006

Local Efforts to Build Relationships & Educate Using Truss Plant Tours

- Whereas the structural building components industry is committed to developing a world-class grassroots advocacy effort;
- Whereas the information collected and disseminated by the structural building components industry has been generally very well received and has contributed to a credible reputation for our industry when people understand what we are trying to accomplish;
- Whereas experience has shown that building closer relationships at the grassroots level allows the structural building components industry to be a more effective educator;
- Whereas an increase in communication between the structural building components industry and the local market will allow our industry to be even more effective in cooperative code development, educational programs and public policy development;
- Whereas these relationships are best formed and solidified through direct contact between our membership (chapters and individuals) and those in their markets;

It is therefore **RESOLVED** by the Board of Directors of WTCA to:

- Request that each of our WTCA Chapters designate a Local Relationship-Building Chair, who will be the point of contact within the chapter on our plant tour educational initiatives;
- Request that each of our WTCA Chapter/WTCA staff teams strives to schedule and host a minimum of two (2) plant tours each year for any of the following groups:
 - Federal, state or local elected legislators,
 - Fire service personnel,
 - Building officials,
 - Architects,
 - Engineers,
 - Builders, and
 - Local high schools, colleges, etc.

The WTCA Chapters/WTCA staff teams will work together on the following tasks to implement this resolution:

- Work with the Local Relationship-Building Chair so that we are on the same page with respect to the implementation approach that the chapter is going to take and WTCA plant tour fundamentals/information;
- WTCA Chapter/WTCA staff teams will develop a detailed database of the associations/organizations in their chapter marketplace to work with;
- As WTCA is contacted by anyone in the marketplace who has questions about building components, WTCA staff will work with the Local Relationship-Building Chair to meet these specific local needs.

Louisiana

Larry Rogers at Rogers Manufacturing Company hosted a tour with his lawmaker, Congressman Rodney Alexander. "There are a number of issues Congress is dealing with that affect our company. I was glad Representative Alexander took the time to come and visit our plant, it gave us the chance to make the case with immigration that we can't simply send 11 million people back home," stated Rogers.

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ness and manufacturing. Mike Karceski has been traveling to Washington, DC for the annual SBC Legislative Conference since 2002, and he's been building a relationship with Manzullo steadily over the years.

That relationship came to fruition this year as Manzullo accepted Karceski's invitations to speak during this year's conference, to write an article for *SBC* and visit his manufacturing facility. In preparation for the plant tour, Mike was understandably nervous. "Whenever you have someone come into the plant, you want to put your best foot forward," he said. "You also want to make sure you have the opportunity to show them a little bit of everything you do."

Beyond the first step of extending the invitation to your lawmaker, advance planning is the key to a successful plant tour (see sidebar on page 34). For Mike, that included identifying and scheduling a job or two that could run the day of the tour so that all of his various machines would be in operation as Manzullo walked through the plant. It also meant working with his head truss technician to pick a few jobs that highlighted the complexity of the design process and software capabilities.

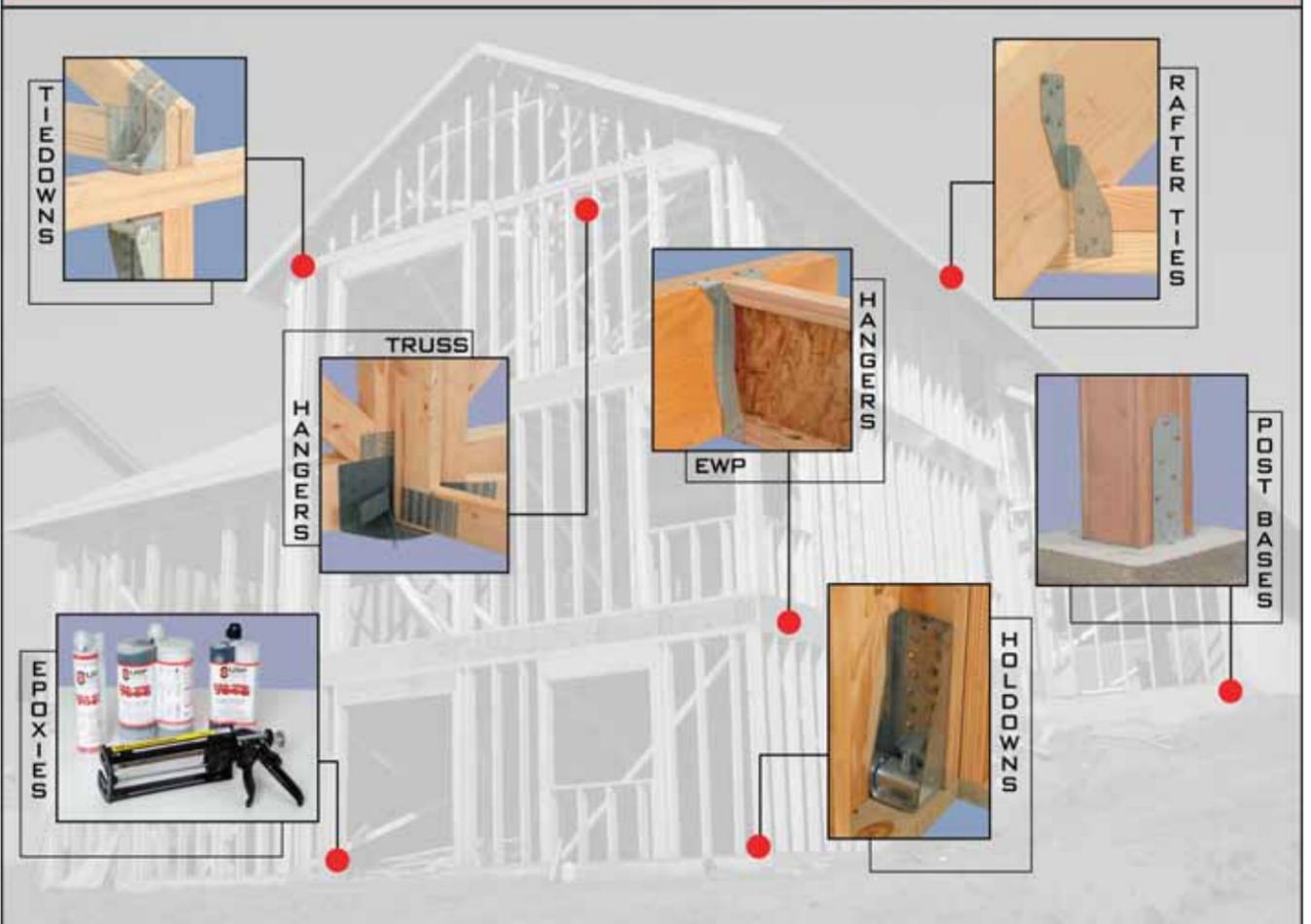
When Manzullo arrived with two legislative staffers in tow, he warned that he was on a tight time schedule and only had an hour and fifteen minutes. Karceski wasted no time and took his guests straight to his design department. "It's where everything starts, so it made sense to begin at the beginning," Mike explained. Immediately, the Congressman was amazed at the size and complexity of the building designs

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Nevada

Glenn McClendon at Sun State Components had Representative Jon Porter into his plant: "I feel the tour with Representative Porter was a great success; he was very interested in our processes and was personable to everyone who met him. When I mentioned that I had been to Washington, DC many times before [as part of the SBC Legislative Conferences], but had never been able to meet with him or anyone on his staff, he promised he would set aside time to personally meet with me in April [at the 2007 conference]."

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(one was light commercial, the other that 18,000 sq. ft. estate). He was also intrigued by the design software's layout and 3D capabilities.

From there, Karceski introduced the group to his project planner so Manzullo could get a sense for the size and scope of the work being done, as well as an appreciation for the just-in-time production and delivery process that is an integral part of the industry. After that, it was on to the production floor, where Karceski proudly showed off his new line of truss fabrication equipment. Everything, from his truss saw, to the gantry tables and roller presses had been installed only a few months prior. "It's a significant investment for Atlas Components, and it's one that's just now beginning to pay off," Mike said. "Installing this equipment allowed us to look at all our processes with a fresh perspective and redesign them to be much more efficient."

Manzullo was duly impressed, stating, "looking at the computer screens, it's amazing the high level of technology and automation at work within your manufacturing process."

As he walked through the production area, Manzullo asked a number of questions ranging from the species and grade of the lumber he buys (for instance, he didn't know SPF stood for Spruce Pine Douglas Fir, he thought it was a specific brand of lumber) to how different sized metal connector plates are chosen for each joint (which gave Mike a good opportunity to discuss all the engineering and load evaluation that is designed into each component). Manzullo also expressed surprise at how much technology was used throughout the entire process.

The plant tour concluded out in the yard, as Karceski explained the stacking and loading process and shared some of his strong frustrations associated with transporting the finished products to the jobsite. Mike explained how difficult it



Another good stop in the tour is a visit with your sawyer where you can give an explanation on how your component saws work.



Your lawmaker will likely be interested to know more about your raw materials. You can share where your lumber come from, and how different species and grades alter the performance and design of your products.



They will also be interested in knowing more about the role metal connector plates play in truss design and performance...



...along with the process you employ to embed the plates into the chords and webs.

was to obtain local oversize load permits from all the municipalities surrounding his plant just to get to the nearest interstate. Manzullo shook his head, saying, "and local officials wonder why companies complain about the cost of doing business here and look to move away." It was an eye opening issue that he hadn't previously been aware of.

Conclusion

It is readily apparent that hosting a plant tour with your lawmaker can be a very valuable and rewarding endeavor. From building closer relationships, to sharing first-hand how reforms being considered by Congress can affect you and your business operations, plant tours are highly effective.

Now that elections are over, and the 110th Congress is about to begin work, this is a perfect time to invite your lawmaker on a tour of your facility. In particular, if your lawmaker is newly elected to Congress, there isn't a better time to start building a relationship with them. If you'd like to host a plant tour, you don't have to go it alone. Contact WTCA staff, and we'll be happy to help you set one up. **SBC**



A great place to end your lawmaker tour is in the yard, where your products are stacked and transported out of the facility. At left, Congressman Manzullo meets Atlas driver Bob Nason.



Your yard is also an excellent place to invite any lingering questions because there is generally a large amount of finished product readily available to point to as you answer their questions.

Iowa

Rick Parrino at Plum Building Systems had a senior staff member from Senator Tom Harkin's office visit their facility. "We've had Senator Charles Grassley come through our plant before, and that was a really powerful experience. Subsequently, I've been able to develop a strong relationship with Grassley's office," said Parrino. "Having this opportunity to build a similar bond with Senator Harkin's office was very important. I can't say enough about how valuable these connections are for helping us address issues facing our company."




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Planning a Plant Tour

... Choose a Date ...

Review your calendar and choose a range of dates when you could best host a plant tour. Keep in mind that members of Congress are very busy, and spend over half the year working in Washington, DC. However, many of them attempt to come home for extended weekends, or travel back home while Congress is in recess. The key is to be as flexible as possible.

... Invite Your Lawmaker ...

Contact your lawmaker's office, first through their local district office, and then through their Washington, DC office, if the local office encourages you to do so. Make the initial request over the phone, but know that many offices may request a follow up email or more formal request letter.

All lawmakers have a "scheduler" who is responsible for filling their boss's day with meetings and events. When making your request, you will need to provide them with your range of possible dates. Again, please try to remain flexible to their schedules as much as possible.

... Prepare ...

Once you have secured a date, begin preparations. Review your jobs leading up to the plant tour and choose a couple that could be used to showcase the capabilities of your design department. Similarly, as best as possible, arrange to run jobs through your production facility that use all of your equipment and/or production employees.

In addition, choose who you want available during the tour to answer the lawmaker's questions and whether you want to allow time for the lawmaker to interact with your employees after the tour is over.

... Ask for Help ...

WTCA is putting together a wealth of materials you can use to enhance your plant tour, including production station signs, brochures and additional informational handouts and policy issue talking points. Contact staff (sshields@qualtim.com or 608/310-6728) for assistance.

... Give the Tour ...

Consider having tour stops at any and/or all of the following aspects of your company:

1. Administration/Management & Sales
2. Design/Engineering
3. Incoming Raw Material
4. Sawing
5. Transport from Saws to Tables
6. Truss Plate Handling
7. Truss manufacturing process
8. Finished goods handling
9. Finished goods storage
10. Shipping

... Follow Up ...

Always send a thank you letter or card to the lawmaker and anyone else in their office that helped make the tour happen. This is also a good opportunity to reiterate any important policy concerns you discussed during the tour. WTCA staff can help you draft a letter, and is creating various template letters you can use as a foundation.

Texas

Frank Klinger, President of Valley Truss & Door, hosted a tour with Congressman Solomon Ortiz. "It was a great experience having Congressman Ortiz in our plant. He said it was very helpful for him to visit manufacturers and businesses, much more effective than an endless stream of people coming through his office, to get their point of view one-on-one on current issues," said Klinger. "The big difference for me was that I had him on my turf and had his undivided attention for an hour and half to discuss our company's problems and issues."



One key to a successful tour is choosing a good location to welcome your guests and start the tour. (L. to R. Denice Blanchard [Congressman's assistant], Gonzalo Acevedo [GM Mid-Valley Truss & Door], Congressman Solomon Ortiz, Frank Klinger)



Don't hesitate to stop and take questions, lawmakers are generally very inquisitive and will usually know very little about your manufacturing process. (L. to R. Klinger, Blanchard, Acevedo, Ortiz)

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